

The Nazi Party: The "Lebensborn" Program

(1935 - 1945)

"Lebensborn" translates to "wellspring of life" or "fountain of life." The Lebensborn project was one of most secret and terrifying Nazi projects. Heinrich Himmler founded the Lebensborn project on December 12, 1935, the same year the Nuremberg Laws outlawed intermarriage with Jews and others who were deemed inferior. For decades, Germany's birthrate was decreasing. Himmler's goal was to reverse the decline and increase the Germanic/Nordic population of Germany to 120 million. Himmler encouraged SS and Wehrmacht officers to have children with Aryan women. He believed Lebensborn children would grow up to lead a Nazi-Aryan nation.

The purpose of this society (Registered Society Lebensborn - *Lebensborn Eingetragener Verein*) was to offer to young girls who were deemed "racially pure" the possibility to give birth to a child in secret. The child was then given to the SS organization which took charge in the child's education and adoption. Both mother and father needed to pass a "racial purity" test. Blond hair and blue eyes were preferred, and family lineage had to be traced back at least three generations. Of all the women who applied, only 40 percent passed the racial purity test and were granted admission to the Lebensborn program. The majority of mothers were unmarried, 57.6 percent until 1939, and about 70 percent by 1940.



In the beginning, the Lebensborn were taken to SS nurseries. But in order to create a "super-race," the SS transformed these nurseries into "meeting places" for "racially pure" German women who wanted to meet and have children with SS officers. The children born in the Lebensborn nurseries were then taken by the SS. Lebensborn provided support for expectant mothers, married or unmarried, by providing a home and the means to have their children in safety and comfort.

The first Lebensborn home was opened in 1936 in Steinhöring, a tiny village not far from Munich. Furnishings for the homes were supplied from the best of the loot from the homes of Jews who had been sent to Dachau. Ultimately, there were 10 Lebensborn homes established in Germany, nine in Norway, two in Austria, and one each in Belgium, Holland, France, Luxembourg and Denmark. Himmler himself took a special interest in the homes, choosing not only the mothers, but also attending to the decor and even paying special attention to children born on his birthday, October 7th.

By 1939, the program had not produced the results Himmler had hoped. He issued a direct order to all SS and police to father as many children as possible to compensate for war casualties. The order created controversy. Many Germans felt the acceptance of unwed mothers encouraged immorality. Eventually Himmler backpedaled, but he never condemned illegitimacy outright. Himmler himself had two illegitimate children.

Lebensborn soon expanded to welcome non-German mothers. In a policy formed by Hitler in 1942, German soldiers were encouraged to fraternize with native women, with the understanding that any children they produced would be provided for. Racially fit women, most often the girlfriends or one-night stands of SS officers, were invited to Lebensborn homes to have their child in privacy and safety.

Ultimately, one of the most horrible sides of the Lebensborn policy was the kidnapping of children "racially good" in the eastern occupied countries after 1939. Some of these children were orphans, but it is well documented that many were stolen from their parents' arms. These kidnappings were organized by the SS in order to take children by force who matched the Nazis' racial criteria (blond hair and blue or green eyes). Thousands of children were transferred to the Lebensborn centers in order to be "Germanized." Up to 100,000 children may have been stolen from Poland alone. In these centers, everything was done to force the children to reject and forget their birth parents. As an example, the SS nurses tried to persuade the children that they were deliberately abandoned by their parents. The children who refused the Nazi education were often beaten. Most of them were finally transferred to concentration camps (most of the time to Kalisz in Poland) and exterminated. The others were adopted by SS families.

In 1942, in reprisals of the assassination of the SS governor Reinhard Heydrich in Prague, a SS unit exterminated the entire male population of a small village called Lidice. During this operation, some SS made a selection of the children. Ninety-one of them were considered good enough to be "Germanized" and sent to Germany. The others were sent to special children camps (i.e. Dzierzazna & Litzmannstadt) and later to the extermination centers.

As the allies advanced, children in the various Lebensborn homes were withdrawn to interior homes. On May 1, 1945, a day after Hitler's death, American troops marched into Steinhöring. They found 300 children, aged six months to six years. Most of the mothers and staff had fled. The British and Russians also found children at Lebensborn homes near Bremen and Leipzig. The majority of these children were either put up for adoption or sent back to their birth families. Some of the children kidnapped in other countries who were living with families throughout Germany were repatriated to their native countries. Unfortunately, many were too Germanic to fit in.

It is nearly impossible to know how many children were kidnapped in the eastern occupied countries. In 1946, it was estimated that more than 250,000 were kidnapped and sent by force to Germany. Only 25,000 were retrieved after the war and sent back to their families. It is known that several German families refused to give back the children they had received from the Lebensborn centers. In some cases, the children themselves refused to come back to their original family - they were victims of the Nazi propaganda and believed that they were pure Germans. It is also known that thousands

of children were not deemed “good enough” to be Germanized were simply exterminated. During the ten years of the program’s existence, at least 7,500 children were born in Germany and 10,000 in Norway.

Sources: [The Forgotten Camps](#); ABC News 20/20 Special Report — Hitler’s “Master Race:” Nazi Program Attempted to Create Racially Pure Children (April 27, 2000).

Lebensborn

Name _____ Date _____

1. What does Lebensborn mean?
2. What man founded Lebensborn?
3. What was outlawed concerning marriage in the Nuremberg Laws?
4. What years was the program in operation?
5. What was the purpose of this program? Explain.
6. What percentage of women were considered racially pure?
7. What year was the first Lebensborn home opened?
8. How were Lebensborn homes furnished?
9. List the countries Lebensborn homes were established in.
10. How many total Lebensborn homes were built?

11. Himmler issued a direct order SS soldiers and police to father children to compensate for what?
12. Did Heinrich Himmler father any of these children?
13. How did kidnapping play a part in the Lebensborn program?
14. About how many children were kidnapped in Poland alone?
15. About how many children were kidnapped in the eastern occupied countries and sent to Germany?
16. How many total children were born during the program's existence?

Answers

1. wellspring of life
2. Heinrich Himmler
3. Intermarriage with Jews and others deemed inferior
4. 195-1945
5. to offer to young girls who were deemed "racially pure" the possibility to give birth to a child in secret.
6. 40%
7. 1936
8. supplied from the best of the loot from the homes of Jews who had been sent to Dachau
9. Germany, Norway, Austria, Belgium, Holland, France, Luxembourg, Denmark
10. 26
11. war casualties
12. 2
13. kidnapping of children by force who matched the Nazis' racial criteria (blond hair and eyes)
14. 100,000
15. 250,000
16. 17,500